THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

Blessed

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John M. Buchanan

Whoever really has considered the lilies of the field or the birds of the air and pondered the improbability of their existence in this warm world within the cold and empty stellar distances will hardly balk at the turning of water into wine – which was, after all, a very small miracle. We forget the greater and still continuing miracle by which water (with soil and sunlight) is turned into grapes.

Wendell Berry

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH

A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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BLESSED

"Sing to the Lord with thanksgiving..." Psalm 147:7

I begin almost every day of my life with a lesson in Reformed theology. It's a great way to start your day and I recommend it highly. It happens not at my desk reading theology, but when I walk to the church office in the morning. More often than not, the first person I encounter is Roger. Roger works on our house staff. Every morning members of the house staff are outside early picking up the night's accumulation of newspapers and other trash, sweeping off the steps, shoveling the walk as appropriate. This is how the lesson goes:

> "Good morning, Roger. How are you this morning?"
> And without fail or deviation, Roger's answer is always, "I'm blessed."

It can be ten degrees below zero or 90 degrees and humid. Roger can be shoveling the sidewalks, mopping a floor, clearing dirty dishes from a morning breakfast meeting. It doesn't matter, the litany is the same ...

> "How are you?"
> "I'm blessed."

I don't know whether Roger ever read the theology of John Calvin. If he hasn't, he doesn't need to because he already understands the essence of Reformed theology. "I'm blessed."

In an important book with a very impressive title, *The Domestication of Transcendence*, Presbyterian theologian William Placher observes that the reformers, Martin Luther, John Calvin and their followers, taught that the mystery of God's grace is so profound that we owe God everything. "Our salvation is not a matter of owing and paying, but comes from God as a gift." [p. 163] And so the fundamental human response to God, the way the reformers saw it, was gratitude. Gratitude even in the world of ethics. Religion has always defined appropriate ethical behaviors, public and private morality, so much so that we often think of religion as a moral system. But Calvin understood and taught that even moral rules were a way to express gratitude to God.

For John Calvin, "knowledge of God produces love and devotion and reverence." Notice – not guilt, fear and moral determination, but love, devotion, reverence – in a word, gratitude. That is very close to the heart of what it means to be a Presbyterian Christian and it is a lesson Roger teaches me every morning when I ask, "How are you?" and he answers, "I'm blessed." It is true – about him and about me and about all of us, it is the most important fact about us and to know it and say it is a good way to start your day and to live it.

It is a major biblical theme as well. "It is good to sing God's praises," Psalm 147 suggests, and then explains, "for God is gracious and a song of praise is fitting.... Sing to the Lord with thanksgiving."

And gratitude for the blessings of God's grace is at the very core of St. Paul's thought as well. At the end of a list of moral and behavioral guidelines, Paul urges the members of the little church in Colossae, "Whatever you do, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God through him."

And, of course, that wonderful story in the Gospel according to Luke that appears in almost every Thanksgiving sermon. Jesus encounters a group of people suffering from leprosy. Their disease was not only extremely unpleasant physically, and terrifying emotionally, it was socially isolating and psychologically devastating. People with leprosy were banished from the rest of society: they could not live in their communities, in their own homes, with their families. They were not allowed to attend synagogue. So great was the fear of leprosy that people avoided any social contact. Even the shadow of a person with leprosy falling on your shadow could cause you to contract the dreaded disease, it was believed.

And so it was a pathetic colony of suffering and from the prescribed distance, they called out to him, "Jesus have mercy!" They were probably begging for money or food and what follows is intriguing. Jesus sends them to see a priest who is the person whose job it is to certify that people who had leprosy were cured, or clean, and therefore fit for normal social contact once again. On the way to find the priest, something happens. By the time they see him, the leprosy is gone, they are clean. The priest witnesses it, certifies them as fit for human contact and suddenly ten dead men are given their lives back – their families, their homes, their love, their spirituality. This was a very happy group of people.

I see them whooping with joy, clapping one another on the back, exchanging high fives, laughing and embracing and weeping and each heading immediately for home. One of the ten returns to Jesus on the way, and when he finds him, falls on his face, thanking him.

Jesus sounds like my mother when he wonders out loud about the other nine and why they didn't express a proper thank you, not even a note, and then says something to the grateful man that changes the meaning and impact of this entire episode. "Get up and go your way, your faith has made you well."

The story is about Jesus miraculously healing, isn't it? It's about Jesus making them all well. What does he mean when he says to this man who returned to say thank you, "Your faith has made you well?" What we want to focus our attention, of course, is on the miraculous cure. Did it really happen? How did it happen? What are the empirical and scientific implications? All of which is very interesting and all of which misses the point, which apparently is that the man isn't really healed until he expresses his gratitude. The other nine are free of leprosy. This man is whole, fully and wonderfully alive because he knows about grace – that all is grace and gives voice to it. He is blessed, knows it and says it – just like Roger.

Professor Walter Brueggemann writes, "Praise is the duty and delight, the ultimate vocation of the human community. Praise is not only a human requirement and a human need, it is also a human delight." [*Israel's Praise*]

That's an interesting thought. Praise – gratitude – is delightful, not only to the one receiving it, but to the one expressing it. There was a wonderful moment at the end of the first Chicago Symphony Orchestra concert I attended early this fall. I suspect that for most of the people in attendance it was our first time back into our newly refurbished and enhanced and handsome hall. Maestro Barenboim himself was conducting. The program included Beethoven's First Symphony and a Brahms' Violin Concerto. It was simply exquisite, from beginning to end. Something very special was happening and everyone knew it. At the end, as the Brahms came to its glorious climax, there was a silence – almost reverent, as if no one wanted to move. We noticed tears in many eyes and then applause, thunderous waves of applause. We clapped until our hands hurt and our arms ached and they we clapped some more. That audience which was transformed into a community of gratitude needed to say "thank you" and we weren't going home until we did it right. We needed to thank God for giving the human race Beethoven and Brahms and we needed to thank the people who gave the money to fix up our Concert Hall and Daniel Barenboim for being an exacting, demanding conductor and the musicians for practicing so hard and giving themselves so thoroughly, and we wanted, I think, to thank one another for being there to share the experience and the gratitude. The gift which that concert was would not have been complete without the opportunity to express gratitude. We went home smiling and excited and happy to be alive and in Chicago, and it was because we had given voice and expression to our thanksgiving.

When C. S. Lewis became a Christian, he thought and wrote about his new faith with artistic finesse and academic objectivity. Lewis noticed that the Bible is full of admonitions to praise God, glorify God, thank God, almost as if human beings would not conclude that God should be praised and thanked, on their own and would not do it without considerable prodding and nagging – not unlike your parents nagging at you to write thank you notes and you, in turn, nagging your own children to be appropriately grateful even when they don't feel like it.

You might even conclude that God was a little petty, said Lewis, what with all this urging, nagging, cajoling human beings to be grateful and to give thanks to God. And then he made a discovery, "I had not noticed how the humblest, and at the same time, most balanced minds praised most: while the cranks, misfits and malcontents praised least. Praise almost seems to be inner health made audible." [*Reflections on the Psalms*] Lewis put in words what I experienced at the Symphony concert: "We delight to praise because the praise not merely expressed but completes the enjoyment."

Sometimes, I think, we are so busy running so fast, overbooked, over-committed, working as hard as we possibly can, that we not only fail to invest ourselves in the experience and expression of gratitude, but we miss the glory and the goodness of the event itself which would, if we allowed it into our lives, command our attention and fill our senses and our spirits and give us deep pleasure. You can be so focused on your work, so committed to high performance, so devoted to your self expectations, so obsessed with your schedule, your calendar, that you actually turn joy and pleasure into an unwanted and unwelcome interruption. Sometimes you can't slow down and focus and experience and enjoy the concert, the meal lovingly prepared, the sunset, the opportunity to hold a child on your lap and read a story, the gift of your beloved's presence. Sometimes you're in such a hurry you forgo the gratitude and sprint up the aisle as

soon as the concert is over to be first out the door and in the first cab and on your way, without wasting a moment.

Art, music, poetry forces us to pay attention. That's the great gift of the arts: they induce us to look, listen, taste, feel – pay attention! Renior, with his loving attention to the human face, forces us to pay attention to the exquisite beauty of a child's face, our friend's or spouse's face, the precious aging face of our parents. The Fourth Church Morning Choir forces us to attend to beauty and truth and to the reality of our own spirit. Poets force us to attend.

Someone introduced me to the poetry of Anne Porter recently. In a poem about May, Porter refers to all the "awakening small creatures" who do not know they have names, but whose voices "praise the moist ground." About autumn, she writes, "Nearing the start of that mysterious last season which brings to a close the other four, I will praise you .... I thank you for that secret praise which burns in every creature."

Poetry, because it demands focused reading and listening, forces us to pay attention... e. e. cummings, who wrote about his early experience of the world in his parents' garden, "Here, as a very little child, I first encountered the mystery who is nature," would later write one of the great expressions of gratitude – almost an explosion of praise,

> I thank You God for most this amazing
> day: for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
> and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything
> which is natural which is infinite which is yes
>
> (now the ears of my ears awake and
> now the eyes of my eyes are opened)

And I couldn't resist Wendell Berry's quiet observation that turning water into wine is a very small miracle compared to that daily miracle by which water and sunlight and soil is turned into grapes.

Sometimes we don't experience and express gratitude because we forget for a moment how conditional and fragile this gift of life is. Sometimes we get it into our heads that we earned and deserve all we have and that other people ought to thank us for our hard work and success, forgetting that life is, in fact, given to us as a gift: that the world and all that is in it is God's gift: that each of us, from the smallest to the greatest didn't do much except to show up on the day of our birth; loved into life by parents, born into life by a mother, nurtured into life by adults who paid attention to us, now sharing a lifetime with our dear ones. None of us willed that we be here and none of us is in control of how long we will be here.

Sometimes we just can't comprehend the mystery of God's grace, just can't or won't comprehend that life is a gift, that we didn't earn it, can't and won't comprehend that basic Christian reality – God's amazing grace in Jesus Christ given for us, given to us without regard to our merit or deserving. Oh, we love to sing about it. *Amazing Grace* has become one of the favorite hymns of

the church and the culture. *Amazing Grace* is used almost everywhere these days, even on a T.V. commercial to persuade you to use VISA instead of MasterCard or American Express – an odd use of grace!

It was Karl Barth who, with penetrating insight into our humanity, said that we don't like the idea of grace, don't like the notion that God does not owe us something, that we did not and can not earn our way into God's favor. That, Barth said, is our sin – that deep pridefulness that will not relinquish our ability to prove ourselves, to win our way into God's good graces somehow to set the goal, discipline our wills, and accomplish our own salvation, our wholeness, or fullness, or happiness.

Grace is a gift, a sheer, unexpected, beautifully surprising gift and all you can do with it is accept it and say "thank you" for it. Why is it so difficult for us?-- so difficult to imagine that we are loved by God, "Just As I Am" the hymn puts it? Why is it so much easier to believe that God will love me and bless me after I've worked at it for awhile or for a whole lifetime.

What Martin Luther and John Calvin discovered 450 years ago, an ever-relevant insight, is that religion, the Christian religion, which intends to celebrate and communicate the amazing grace of God, has as much trouble with it as everybody else. Religion is always turning grace into grim determination, good news into bad news, the joyful celebration of God's good gifts into a system whereby we can earn and deserve God's favor.

William Placher says that in every age the church has had difficulty with grace and in every age turns to moralism, to the more manageable task of measuring morality and deciding who is making it and who is not. Sometimes I think it has become the chief activity of the mainline church in our day and that at the end of the day, our church will not be remembered as the community of faith that responded gratefully to God's grace by loving boldly and generously and graciously in the world, but the church that finally decided, once and for all to ordain or not to ordain its gay and lesbian members.

Placher writes, "All want to decrease the mystery and find clear rules, so that people could look at themselves and measure their chance of salvation. If they (Catholics, Lutherans, Calvinists) considered at all the earlier ideal of a morality based primarily on gratitude, which would honor God and serve the neighbors without reference to reward, they decided not to risk it." [p. 163]

And suddenly it is Thanksgiving and, happily, we still set a day aside to express our gratitude for gifts we did not earn or particularly deserve.

Earth's finest hour – autumn is – the blaze of color, the deep reds and bright yellows. The Saturday morning markets a month ago were a feast for all the senses: ripe green and red peppers, white and purple onions, orange pumpkins, pastel squash, God's glorious extravagance. God's grace presents itself to us to behold and receive and enjoy.

Thanksgiving. And if we get it right, we remember brave men and women who left everything behind and boarded small ships to cross an unknown ocean to create a new life in a new world

and who gave that new life to the children, who passed it on, generation to generation – to us, a gift.

And if we do it right, we will gather about us our beloved ones, we will head home, or gather our children in and our dearest and best friends and we will know that the precious gift of people to love and care for and with whom to share the privilege of being alive is a gift without price, and we will hold hands around our tables and give thanks.

I'm glad Thanksgiving comes when it does in the calendar, usually a few days before Advent. It always feels like the official opening of Christmas and for many years one of our family traditions has been: no Christmas music before, but on Thanksgiving Day – usually after dinner and the football games – it is OK to get out the Christmas music for its first hearing, a reminder of the simple and pure grace, that gift of a child – which we can only humbly receive and about which we can only say "thank you."

It is good to give God thanks. "Comely" is the way the old translation puts it. To give voice to our gratitude is to experience the gift, to know God's grace.

> Now thank we all our God
> With heart and hands and voices
> Who wondrous things hath done,
> In whom this world rejoices;
> Who from our mothers' arms
> Hath blessed us on our way
> With countless gifts of love,
> And still is ours today.

How are you today?

I'm blessed.

Amen.